

Berlusconi suffers major defeat in Italian regional elections

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It was anticipated that Italy's ruling right-wing coalition would suffer losses in the Italian regional elections held last weekend (April 3-4), but the result far exceeded expectations. Most commentaries spoke of a "landslide" and "debacle" for Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. The newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, which is not at all hostile to the government, declared that Italians had "cut Berlusconi down to size."

Berlusconi's alliance of right-wing parties, called the House of Freedom, which has governed the country for four years, lost in 11 of the 13 regions in which elections were held to the centre-left alliance called "l'Unione" (the Union), led by the former European Union commission president Romano Prodi. Berlusconi's coalition ceded control of 5 regions that it held going into the elections, and was able to maintain power only in the regions of Lombardy and Venice in Italy's wealthy north. The Prodi camp retained power in the 5 regions it already controlled and won a further 6.

Out of a total of 20 Italian regions, 16 are now in the hands of the opposition. Alongside Lombardy and Venice, only Sicily and the small region of Molise, 2 regions that did not hold elections last weekend, are still governed by Berlusconi and his allies.

In the last comparable regional elections, held in 2000, the Berlusconi camp won 53 percent of the vote, with the opposition (then called the Olive Tree Alliance) gaining just 44 percent. This time, the figures were exactly reversed.

The election turnout of 72 percent was only slightly lower than five years ago. A substantially smaller participation had been expected as a result of the massive media barrage over the death of the pope.

The regional elections are traditionally regarded as a measure of the popular mood in advance of national parliamentary elections. These are set for 2006.

In last weekend's poll, approximately two thirds of the electorate were called upon to select regional governments, as well as some 360 city and provincial parliaments.

When the Olive Tree Alliance suffered a defeat five years

ago similar to that handed to the right-wing parties in last weekend's vote, the head of the government at that time, Massimo d'Alema, a Left Democrat, resigned. The following year, Berlusconi's right-wing alliance won the national parliamentary election by a clear majority.

Berlusconi, however, does not have the slightest intention of responding in a similar manner to his own election debacle. In the run-up to the elections, he had dismissed them as a purely regional affair without any national significance. After the result was announced, his party assigned blame for the defeat to the House of Freedom regional candidates. Berlusconi's line was that he had not intervened in the election campaign, and the result could not, consequently, be considered a referendum on his policies.

Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether the Berlusconi government can survive this electoral disaster. The result has already led to public recriminations within the right-wing coalition and sparked a severe crisis.

Although the election losses were predominantly suffered by Berlusconi's own party, Forza Italia, he has sought to shift the blame onto his party's allies—the post-fascist National Alliance and the Christian Democratic Union. Berlusconi has accused both partners of tearing apart the alliance with "their daily quarrels."

For their part, the leaders of these two organisations are bitter over the fact that in their traditional centres in the south of the country, all regions, with exception of Sicily, are now under the control of the opposition. They have demanded that Berlusconi make policy corrections, which he immediately rejected.

Gianfranco Fini, head of the National Alliance and foreign affairs minister, demanded the government pay more attention to economic and social problems and no longer give the impression that it favours the north. "Voters made clear that we must change course," he said. A Christian Democratic deputy even called the election a "referendum on Berlusconi"—a comment that is said to have outraged the prime minister.

There is little political agreement between the constituent

parties in the government coalition—Forza Italia, the National Alliance, the Christian Democratic Union, and the Northern League, which is active only in the north of the country. The alliance has been held together only by its desire to hold onto power.

As long as Berlusconi was able to keep the coalition securely in power with the help of his media empire and his populist demagoguery, his partners remained loyal. But as soon as Berlusconi's popularity began to wane, conflicts within the coalition broke out in the open.

Romano Prodi assessed the election result as a call for the opposition to take over the national government. However, he made no demands for Berlusconi's resignation and declared that his alliance was merely preparing to assume governmental power next year. "Italy needs stability, hope and unity. My task is to fulfil these expectations," he said.

These are remarkable words. The election result is primarily the result of the enormous political and social polarisation in the country. The positive result for Prodi's alliance expresses a widespread rejection of the Berlusconi government, rather than support for Prodi's program, which differs only insignificantly from that of Berlusconi himself. In 2001, the centre-left government was voted out of office after it had undertaken major attacks on the working population.

If Prodi now refrains from demanding the prime minister's resignation and appeals for stability and national unity, this underscores his determination to contain the popular opposition to the Berlusconi government. The last thing Prodi and his allies—including the Democratic Left and Communist Refoundation—want is to take power under conditions in which broad layers of the working class are politically and socially mobilised.

Resistance to the Berlusconi government has developed over a period of years. A large majority of the population rejected Italy's participation in the Iraq war alongside the US. At that time, millions took to the streets in Italy to oppose the war.

The kidnapping in Iraq of Italian journalist Giuliana Sgrena followed by the killing of the man who negotiated her release, Nicola Calipari, by a US military patrol served to revive anti-war sentiment in the spring of this year.

In addition, Italian voters have grown increasingly disillusioned with broken promises made by the demagogic Berlusconi. Opposition has grown to welfare cuts, anger has increased over sinking living standards, and indignation has risen over the way the head of government has used his office to feather his own nest.

Among other things, Berlusconi had promised generous tax reductions for average earners, but the measure proved farcical when the government permitted substantial increases

in a range of fees for public services. The end result was a significant loss of purchasing power for ordinary working people.

Despite the fact that Berlusconi owns Italy's largest private television outlets and several newspapers, and as head of government assumed control of the country's public television system, his enormous propaganda offensive was less and less able to mute popular discontent.

Berlusconi's right-wing alliance suffered particularly spectacular defeats in several regions. In Apulia, which lies in the heel of the Italian boot, Nicchi Vendola was elected as regional president. Vendola is a member of Communist Refoundation (Rifondazione Comunista), calls himself a communist, and has not sought to conceal the fact that he is gay. Such a development would have been inconceivable in Italy's conservative and Catholic south a few years ago.

The defeat in the region of Latium, which includes the capital city Rome, was an especially serious loss for the government coalition. Prior to the elections, the acting regional president, Francesco Storace (National Alliance), had said, "If I lose, Berlusconi's successor will be called Prodi."

There had been speculation as to whether the campaign of an ultra-right-wing organisation led by the granddaughter of the Duce, Alexandra Mussolini, could cost Storace his majority. In the event, the victory of the Union candidate was so clear that Storace could not blame his defeat on the 2 percent of the vote that ultimately went to Mussolini.

While the present state of affairs points to a change of government next year, such a development would do nothing to solve the problems confronting the mass of the population. In fact, the political character of the Prodi alliance offers Berlusconi a chance even now to win the coming parliamentary election.

The forces predominating in the Prodi alliance are conservative bourgeois parties and politicians who, like Prodi himself, reject any mobilisation of the working class. The so-called "left" parties in the alliance, such as Communist Refoundation, fulfil the task of providing a left cover for politicians committed to imposing whatever attacks on the working class are necessary to make Italian capitalism more competitive within the global market economy.



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